

Could Perry Make Us Miss Bush?

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Because as governor of Texas Rick Perry holds the same position that George W. Bush held before becoming president, it is difficult not to compare the two men. It is also apparent that despite both being conservative Republicans with abrasive styles and palpable contempt for educated liberals and having both having served as governor of Texas, the two are quite different. Those differences provide some interesting insight both the nature of Republican politics and our political culture more generally.

When he first became a national political figure, Bush seemed to represent the final step of a generational, ideological and geographical shift within the Republican Party. The symbolism of George W. Bush, whose father was almost a caricature of a patrician, and at least early in his career, liberal, northern Republican, emerging as a conservative, younger and southern face of the Republican Party was hard to miss. Nonetheless, candidate Bush's rhetoric about a "humbler" American foreign policy and efforts to position himself as a "compassionate conservative" seems like a stark contrast to candidate Perry about whom there is nothing humble or compassionate.

Rick Perry's emergence as a national figure is a reminder that nothing is ever static and that politics can always get more extreme. Bush had roots in the newer, more Southern and conservative wing of the Republican Party, but due to his family name and degrees from elite academic institutions, still had ties to an older and more moderate Republican Party. Perry, however, is a far more authentic product of the right wing of his party. Although, Bush is only four years older than Perry, in some ways they seem to have come from different generations.

Perry has been able to capture, even through his body language, a righteous right-wing anger to which Bush could only aspire. Perry's extreme positions are well articulated and genuine, particularly compared to Bush whose inarticulateness sometimes suggested a lack of confidence about his views. When George H.W. Bush said something that was radically conservative, it was clear he was pandering. No matter how extreme Rick Perry's statements are, he seems genuine. George W. Bush was somewhere between the two.

While George W. Bush sought to portray himself as an outsider with little knowledge of Washington, his political and economic pedigree, along with his strong ties to the Republican establishment, made it difficult to view Bush that way. Moreover, when Bush became president his first cabinet included people like Colin Powell who all but symbolized the Washington establishment and had strong ties to what was left of the liberal wing of the Republican Party. Perry is different. Should he become president, it is not likely that his administration will be dominated by members of earlier, more liberal,

Republican governments. A Perry presidency, if it ever comes to that, will be quite different as he would likely appoint an ideologically extreme cabinet with fewer links to an older, more moderate Republican Party. This would probably not make a Perry administration more effective, but it would make it more frightening.

Perry embodies an even greater anger and unwillingness to understand policy questions in anything but the most ideologically driven terms than Bush did during his first run for president. This is both disturbing and a reflection of how much tension and hostility permeates our political system. Perry's now famous debate response about the death penalty demonstrates this tension and hostility. His response was striking not only because of the sight of people applauding Perry's having presided over 234 executions, but because of the sincerity and confidence with which he stated his position. Bush, in a similar situation would have given in to a smirk or simply bumbled his words thus making himself sound weaker. Perry, however, was beaming with pride both after the applause and after the initial response.

It is easy to imagine Perry taking similar pride in not believing that climate change is serious and due to human activity or in his belief that a program established to keep old people from starving which is based on contributions from working people is a Ponzi scheme rather than a flawed program, but one which is enormously important to the ethical and financial future of our country.

A central lesson from the Bush administration is that certainty does not compensate for being wrong. Should Perry become president, he will make Bush look positively wishy-washy, but probably will be even more wrong on more issues than his fellow Texas governor was. Perry's certainty, bravado and sincerity take the place of curiosity, nuance, creativity and the ability to work across differences to solve problems. America does not need a president for whom getting political opponents angry seems to be more important than solving problems, but that is precisely the kind of president Perry would probably be.